

BERGSON'S RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF EVOLUTION*

THE center of Bergson's position, the essence of his originality, is the insistence on the reality of time. Time is not a moving image of eternity; eternity is rather a frozen image of duration. If evolution has meaning, God did not rest on the seventh day, for reality is "a creation pursued without end." God is perpetual creativity and his nature is adumbrated by our living experience with its limited freedom. There is a real future which is bound to follow the present, just because all is not pre-determined. "The duration of the universe must therefore be one with the latitude of creation which can find place in it."¹

Because he saw things in this perspective, Bergson could flatly deny that Herbert Spencer, for example, had an evolutionary philosophy. Spencer attempted, Bergson thought, to reconstruct the process by putting together pieces of the product, as if they fitted into the static pattern of a gigantic jig-saw puzzle. The same insight enabled Bergson to reject post-Kantian idealism, on the ground that it projected a picture of reality just as static as that of the mechanists. Some Idealists assume that various appearances possess reality in varying degree according to a fixed scheme, whereas in a world of real change, the very design of the world will change with the movement that projects it into being. The world as a whole is a concrete duration, continually reconstituting itself. The intuition of duration exposes the mistake in Kant's fixed categories as well as the efforts of Spinoza and Leibniz (as Bergson interprets them) to graft modern science on ancient metaphysics and ex-

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Religious Interpretation of Evolution 15

plain metaphysically how all is given in advance. Finally, the same reason explains why Bergson views the distinction of mind and body in Descartes' philosophy as representing two incompatible metaphysics: that of free will or creative act and that of mechanism.

If becoming, not being, is the real; if evolution requires novelty that cannot be reduced to a rearrangement of pre-existent elements; if the phases of activity cannot be fittingly represented as a succession of instantaneous states like frames of a motion picture film; then what role does matter have in Bergson's philosophy? How indeed can matter differ from mere appearance? Can laws and genera, the universals of abstract thought, lend facility to action, unless action depends on uniformities and stabilities of *some* sort? Can memory trail our whole past after us unless there is determination of present by past? Bergson does not fully answer questions like these. He suggests that matter is the polar opposite of creative activity, namely, repetitive change. Nothing purely static can be real, but the creative principle needs, he says, only to relax its tension—to *detend*—in order to extend, and become repetitive and routine. The distinction corresponds to that between craftsmanship and mass production. Matter, the principle of relaxation, is the prevalence of fixed habit, of inane repetition, which dully obstructs the eager urgency of life. Creative evolution breaks the ties of blind necessity and introduces as much indetermination into matter as possible. One recalls Plato's cosmic reason "persuading" necessity; only in Bergson's case, there are no rational forms to give determinate purpose and direction to persuasion and importance to freedom. In terms of bare impetus from behind, without ideal direction or immanent pattern, evolution can yield unpredictable nov-

elty but not significance, because it contains no principle of significance. Emergent novelties are, taken strictly, mere differences which make no difference. Without some goal, design, pattern, tendency, some principle of significant emphasis, evolution hardly deserves the epithet "creative." Or is creation bare flux? Even Heraclitus, especially Heraclitus, had his *Logos*.

Bergson, on the whole, would not have conceded this rational claim. But the question may be asked whether the philosopher can purchase the advantages of irrationalism and voluntarism without paying the price of nihilism. The hidden cost of indeterminism and activism is concealed from Bergson by an optimistic faith in evolutionary *advance*. This faith alone justifies the adjective "creative," which implies both that something new comes to be and that it is good. Bergson at first offers no arguments to show that evolution is good. He assumes that the cosmic impulse is self-justifying, endlessly self-enriching, and, in fact, divine.

This goes beyond intuition of real duration; it requires an additional act, an act of faith. Even if, as Bergson in the end maintains, intuition at its highest pitch merges into mystical experience, the religious mystic has never experienced God as mere impetus towards some nameless future of unforeseeable possibilities, but as infinite perfection, which out of plenitude of power overflows into its creatures. The mystic vision may give equal significance to past, present, and future; evolution, if creative, promises more than it has yet performed.

Bergson's strength lay in unwavering insistence that life has unrealized opportunities and will always have them, as it must be ever active. He therefore sharply rejected every attempt to set up a static ideal external to creative activity

itself. The fund of potential creation must not be limited. Present achievement does not cancel the need for continued effort nor diminish the store of what may yet be won. He criticized science for reducing the whole order of the universe to a fixed pattern, so that, duped by our own rigidities, we imagine that all happens of necessity and cannot be otherwise. But the upwelling of reality exceeds our measure, mocks our all too lucid intellect. We may intuit the tendency of the whole, but only with a vague recognition little better than surmise. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and James, Bergson resists easy rationalizations and seeks the significance of life in a power that breaks through ordinary frontiers. But he conceived the problems thus raised neither with the intensity of the continental thinkers nor with the tentativeness of the pragmatic American. He also did not, as Whitehead later did (partly under Bergson's influence), explore the possibility of re-thinking the logic of process.

Only in his last book did Bergson work out the full significance of creativity as involving not mere novelty but improvement, or progress. This aspect long remained implicit, merged into the image of life as a single continuity of effort. Without such a postulate of progress, evolution ends in meaninglessness—novelty without importance. With the postulate, evolution acquires a standard or norm to direct the course of vital effort. Bergson's thinking, despite his criticism of finalism, never excluded faith in an indwelling cosmic direction or tendency; he was concerned only to deny that success was a foregone conclusion. In his later years Bergson ventured to specify the ultimate direction with new confidence and with new depth of religious feeling.

The Two Sources of Morality and Religion, published in 1932, when its author was more than seventy years of age, extends Bergson's thought in a way that he himself recognized as new. The antithesis of matter and life, intellect and intuition, reappear in the contrast between "closed" (or customary) and "open" (as prophetic) morality and religion. The world process, however, is no longer viewed as undergoing revision as a whole, since a pervasive need now seems to give steady direction to it. A yearning for a *definite* achievement determines the work of the open morality and dynamic religion. Bergson does not, however, profess to know how or whether the achievement will be brought about.

The living impetus is now required to do more than introduce indeterminism into matter. Indeterminism is too negative an expression for the freedom that hovers before Bergson's imagination. He has in view an outgoing of the spirit. Life must break the compulsive hold of customary obligation within a closed society in order to fuse the solidarity of universal brotherhood. Life must pass beyond the protective function of static religion and, nullifying the immemorial power of myth and superstition, release the vision of the mystic. What then happens can no longer be described biologically as a blind struggle of life for expansion. The whole is a movement of the immanent divine life itself, which does not evolve its nature but gradually manifests or expresses it, as it makes its way against matter towards an objective which intuition fitfully appreciates. The goal is not a good to be contemplated or finally possessed, but a mode of activity after which our inward life yearns. Had Bergson re-edited his earlier works in the light of his last, we may wonder, how would he have annotated

them? He was certainly aware that he had departed from the empirical basis of fact to enter upon a speculative enterprise,² and admitted that his new views were independent of the position reached in *Creative Evolution*. One may agree with Bergson that the new views are compatible with the old, and yet perceive that the new speculation—the identification of vital impetus with divine love—radically alters the center of gravity of his system from natural evolution to divine creation.

It is not difficult to understand why Bergson may have been more aware of the continuity of his thought than of the profound modification introduced by the new emphasis. From the first, he had tended to identify life with a conscious, perhaps even a spiritual, immaterial activity. When at length in the maturity of reflective wisdom he saw evolutionary process as the unfolding of divine love, and made of this the heart and center of his philosophy, it seemed to him that he was using nothing but what lay at hand. His last arguments might with some justice be viewed as attempts to make good the tacit claims of his thought, for which a strictly evolutionary formula makes inadequate provision.

Bergson's philosophy exploited the ambiguity of the notion of life. The biologist takes as the subject-matter of his science the sum of phenomena presented by living things. He defines "living" in objective terms, characterizing it externally by observable modes of behavior of specific things, for example, reproduction, inheritance, digestion, growth. The biologist himself is an object of his own science; but he is a living being which also daily performs functions that fall outside the subject-matter of his science. The most obvious example of this is his activity as a sci-

entist; and in addition, he hates, fears, feels pride and humiliation, and loves; he discharges social duties and perhaps performs religious rites. In these activities he finds the significance of his own life. Apart from them, life reduces to an endless round of organic behavior or a meaningless display of chance in mutation and natural selection. Bergson's interpretation of evolution owes its originality and power, as well as its fascination, to his habit of reading all life in terms appropriate to his intuition of his own being as an integral spiritual effort.

The integrity of an act, even the simple act of drawing a line or taking a step, forms the pivot of his argument. The integrity does not appear, however, to the outward eye, save as we read in outward behavior what is obvious to each in himself, or as himself. The unity of intention and execution resists and eludes analytical fragmentation. Past, present, and future interpenetrate one another explicitly in the developed life of human conscious action. The interpenetration is virtual in lower forms of life. At every point, Bergson grasped life as effort, inventive effort, aiming after freer display of powers, though it is ignorant both of specific practical means and clear ideal goals. Life must find ways to use matter in order to overcome material obstacles. But if life spreads in this way—if it is a single wave or act breaking itself up to overcome specific difficulties by various methods, as by instinct and intelligence, for example—then life is no routine affair of mutation and selection but the creative expansion of significance throughout the dull and dead. This is the point to which Bergson shifts the emphasis in his last work. In a sense, there is nothing new; but in philosophy displacement of emphasis may have transforming results. What first figured in Bergson's philosophy as a

Religious Interpretation of Evolution 21

cunning display of living energy comes forth in the end as the progressive achievement of divine love. Bergson's mature wisdom went beneath all confusions to the religious root of the conception of a creative evolution.

The two sources of mortality and religion correspond to the two perspectives mingled by Bergson in all his writing, but now sharpened and clarified and possibly purged of inner conflict. They may be described most simply—though in words not borrowed from Bergson—as mundane and divine, as natural and supernatural, as finite and infinite, as conservative and creative. One type of morality and religion is natural, in the sense that it represents a provision of nature useful in the struggle of humans to survive. The other type goes beyond nature and bare survival to the creative energy that transforms nature and imparts to life its true dignity.

Bergson analyses the morality of obligation in a naturalistic, sociological fashion. Obligation is a compulsion imposed on the individual by his social group, but it is not merely external, since the individual takes it up into himself as his civilized—or, at least, as his socialized—nature. Bergson rejects *a priori* formalism of the Kantian type and every other theory that offers to rationalize obligation so as to disguise its true origin in social pressure. We may compare and balance obligations, but that is possible only because first of all there are obligations to balance and reason about. Bergson does not make the mistake of some evolutionary philosophers, who attempt to derive the sense of moral obligation from the fact of social pressure. If there is an evolution of morals, Bergson considers it to involve the coming of obligation as something wholly new into the world. Force is not obligation. The compulsion of society

works with the aid of force, but only to reinforce obligation, which expresses the universal human need of a solid group. Obligation is almost like an instinct. It is a natural human way of meeting the demands of life.

This natural or customary morality is the morality of the closed society; it implies the separation of one social group from another and their mutual indifference, if not suspicion and hostility. War naturally follows from such social exclusiveness. Society based on morality of this character resembles a colony of mutually supporting cells or relatively independent organisms, which individually and collectively take no interest in the well-being of other colonies. Bergson regards this development at the end of one great line of evolutionary advance as exactly parallel to the instinctive articulation of insect societies at the end of the other great line.

It will be recalled in this connection that Bergson pictures the entire process of organic evolution as following two chief thoroughfares: instinct and intelligence. Instinct culminates in the life of hive and anthill, which is sustained by the "somnambulistic" automatism of the individual bees and ants. They act instinctively; they severally always "know" what to do, having no genuine choice of alternatives, since their functions are predetermined by their structures. Alternatives cannot present themselves to such beings. In the other line of advance, intelligence culminates in the deliberately hesitating, inventive, resourceful action of men; but to secure social solidarity sufficient for survival, a social limitation had to be imposed upon alternatives otherwise available to individuals. The group mores serve the needs of life by reducing the dangers inherent in the arbitrary or willful freedom of individuals. Obligation among men plays

the part of instinct among social insects, and like instinct tends to merge into habit and unconsciousness.

It is the same with static religion, which, for Bergson, is a "natural" religion in an almost biological sense. The only animal endowed with high intelligence, man is also the only animal who makes myths and who engages in religious practices. As Bergson puts it, "Homo sapiens, the only creature endowed with reason, is also the only creature to pin its existence to things unreasonable."³ These unique activities are neither exceptional nor late among men, but seem to be found from the very earliest times. Bergson relates the two distinguishing characteristics of human life to each other, and interprets primitive religion as an instinctive provision, by which nature guards man against the chronic anxieties to which farsighted intelligence miserably exposes him. Religious rites and myth-making secure confident action in the face of various evils which intelligence recognizes. Thus in general, religion appears as "a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence."⁴ The inventive initiative of intelligence tends to set the individual at odds with his group; but the surviving remnant of instinct, though eclipsed by intelligence, projects a counterfeit recollection or illusory perception to preserve the cohesiveness of the community. A guardian divinity protects the city. Bergson at once sets about rendering this figurative account in more literal terms, but we need not repeat the details. Broadly speaking, his method consists in postulating an instinctive activity which is first disturbed by the intrusion of intelligence and then restored by representations evoked by instinct in terms borrowed from intelligence.

From the point of view of a primitive group, cohesion is achieved by custom; morality is custom, and it is coexten-

sive with primitive religion, for religion forbids departure from custom. Primitive religion may thus be considered "a precaution against the danger man runs, as soon as he thinks at all, of thinking himself alone"—"a defensive reaction of nature against intelligence."⁵ Mythology will eventually spring from this reaction, but, "like flower-bearing plants," it is a late product of nature. There will be first a simpler system of taboos, by which the prohibition becomes installed in the thing—the dynamic in the static—without leading to the projection of a complete personality, or a god.

Another product of developed intelligence is the idea of death, the certainty of each that he must die. Animals do not know this; they simply live. But men must live in the face of inevitable death, and may hesitate in the movements of life because of this. The threat of despondency is countered by nature with the image of a continuation of life beyond death, and the balance is restored in favor of effective living. From this point of view, "religion is a defensive reaction of nature against the representation, by intelligence, of the inevitability of death."⁶

An intelligence that can compare experiences, generalize, and look ahead, will become aware of the risks attending action, of the vast gulf between intention and execution. We can set a mechanism going but it often fails of its end—the hurled spear misses the mark. Religion reacts by forming representations of favorable powers which can be invoked to guarantee successful action. The optimism of life is restored. Religion once more appears in the guise of a defensive reaction of nature against intelligence; in this case, against intelligent recognition of "a depressing margin of the unexpected between the initiative taken and the effect

Religious Interpretation of Evolution 25

desired.”⁷ Eventually the world becomes populated with all manner of unseen powers.

Such defensive reactions produce in the course of time the whole array of magical practices, animal and spirit worship, gods, mythology, superstitions of all kinds. Bergson attempts to treat them as complex exfoliations from a single stem. Static religion springs from the demands of natural life.

Like closed morality, static religion serves men, but only at the cost of losing touch with the vital impetus. Attachment to this impetus produces open morality and dynamic religion. Dynamic religion does not need to resort to myth and superstition to accomplish all that static religion does in lending confidence and serenity to men that they may act. It does not need to tell tales, as if to comfort frightened children, for it works by attaching men to their creative source, whence flows into them a love of all men. The love of humanity does not result from simply enlarging the in-group of closed morality, but differs from closed morality in kind, being the work of an agency altogether different from nature.

Intuition once again redeems intelligence, but now it has become frankly mystical. Mysticism consummates the “fringe of intuition” surrounding intelligence. Intelligence serves particular ends of action and may spin theories. The mystic soul does not speculate about the real and takes no interest in particular ends.

It would be content to feel itself pervaded, though retaining its own personality, by a being immeasurably mightier than itself, just as an iron is pervaded by the fire which makes it glow. Its attachment to life would henceforth be its inseparability from this principle, joy in joy, love of that which is all love. In addition it would give itself to society,

but to a society comprising all humanity, loved in the love of the principle underlying it. The confidence which static religion brought to man would thus be transfigured: no more thought for the morrow, no more anxious heart-searching. . . . Now detachment from each particular thing would become attachment to life in general.⁸

Few men achieve the mystic's concentration. Had many done so, nature would not have stopped at the human species, for the great mystic transcends man. The ultimate end of mysticism is the establishment of partial coincidence with the creativity of life. "This effort is of God, if it is not God himself."⁹ By transcending material limitation, the mystic must be considered to extend divine action.

Bergson criticizes Greek and Hindu mysticism on the same grounds. Except for the supreme Christian mystics, all have stopped short of the final stage, never reaching the point where "contemplation is engulfed in action," and the human will becomes at one with the divine will. The Greek felt action to be a weakening of contemplation. The Hindu often felt life to be "unremitting cruelty," and his problem was how to escape from it. Bergson opposes to both of these, the "complete" mysticism of "action, creation, love."

Beyond ecstasy comes action; between them lies the great mystic's "darkest night." The night ends when the soul completes its metamorphosis from vision to volition, from "seeing" God to becoming his instrument. God then acts through the soul, and the soul swells with superabundance of life. It sees and speaks and acts simply, but works at vast enterprises. "For the love which consumes him is no longer simply the love of man for God, it is the love of God for all men. Through God, in the strength of God, he loves all mankind with a divine love."¹⁰ Such love as that is neither

Religious Interpretation of Evolution 27

instinctive nor intellectual, but forms the source of all instinct and all intelligence. Bergson says that God needs men, that he may love them; hence, he undertook "to create creators, that he may have, besides himself, beings worthy of his love."¹¹ What the mystic love "wants to do, with God's help, is to complete the creation of the human species and make of humanity what it would have straightaway become, had it been able to assume its final shape without the assistance of man himself."¹²

This last quotation with its nascent finalism, throws special light on Bergson's concluding declaration that "men do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands."¹³ He means so much more than the commonplaces of recent naturalistic humanism that the more amounts to an antithesis. "Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they . . . intend to make just the extra effort required for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods."¹⁴

At first glance far removed from the more naturalistic spirit of *Creative Evolution*, this conclusion seems to do no more than expose to full view at last the religious root of Bergson's whole career as a metaphysician. It seems almost as if all that has happened has come about through a shift of attention from the facts of evolution to the significance of the creativeness which he found in them. Bergson at no time pared creation down to the simple emergence of novelty. Creativity implies enhancement of spiritual significance, so that in the end life and religion are for Bergson one and the same.

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NOTES

1. *Creative Evolution*, tr. Arthur Mitchell (London, 1911), p. 359.
2. Cf. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, tr. R. A. Audra and C. Brereton (London, 1935), pp. 219-220.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 188. In this case the emended translation of the Double-day Anchor edition (1954), p. 220, has been used.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
14. *Ibid.*